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Recommendations to the ASEM from

The First Asia-Europe NGO Conference on the Future of Asian-European Relations

Bangkok 27-29 February 1996

OVER 350 women and men representing 100 peoples' organizations and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) participated in the first Joint Asia-Europe NGO Conference with the theme "Beyond Geopolitics and Geoeconomics: Towards a New Relationship Between Asia and Europe" between Feb 27-29 in Bangkok. This conference was held as a parallel to the Asia-Europe Meeting (Asem) scheduled to be held March 1-2, between 10 Asian and 15 European heads of state.

The conference unanimously endorsed the parallel withdrawal of France from French Polynesia and New Caledonia supervised by the European Union (EU) and of Indonesia from East Timor under the auspices of ASEAN. The NGO meeting also called on the Asian governments to reject the Multilateral Investment Agreement promoted by the European Union and the World Trade Organization. The conference also demanded that Asem governments end repression and harassment of NGOs and end the climate of fear in which they currently operate in.

At the same time, the conference recognized the challenges confronting Asia and Europe and decided to work towards forging a shared vision and a common programme of action between the two continent that goes beyond a narrow obsession with economic growth.

The participants were of the view that by centering relations on mere geopolitical and geoeconomic considerations, Asem is primarily serving the narrow interests of dominant elites in the two regions.

It is in this context that the participants sought to put forward an alternative vision that would be people-centered, socially just, economically equitable, ecologically sustainable and politically participatory. Such a vision would embody respect for human rights and human dignity and nurture the spiritual, moral, intellectual and cultural lives of all individuals and communities in both the regions.

Towards this end, the conference urged transparency and accountability in the Asem process. The participation of citizens in the decision-making process of

governments in both continents should not be just limited to parliamentarians and business people.

Participants agreed that organizations of workers, women, indigenous and tribal communities, popular organizations and NGOs have to be also included. In this regard, the conference declaration expressed the desire to look forward to a continuing dialogue and to the establishment of the mechanisms that would facilitate this. This demands social commitment and political will on the part of governments of Asia and Europe.

As part of this process, the 25 governments should ensure that women's human rights are respected and promoted and that the benefits of economic development are shared more equitably.

The conference endorsed that respect for human rights should be central to Asia-Europe relations and emphasized that participating countries in Asem are all signatories to UN summit declarations (Rio 1992, Vienna 1993, Cairo 1994, Copenhagen and Beijing 1995). As of such conference participants reminded the ASEM governments to remember their obligations and responsibilities under these convenants and give the utmost respect to the protection of human rights.

1. Towards Sustainable People-centred Social and Economic Relations

We support efforts to increase mutually beneficial trade and investment between Asia and Europe. But we are concerned that agreements such as the GATT Uruguay Round only serve to strengthen the economic power of already powerful economic actors. Northern powers push trade liberalisation while increasing protection of their own economies through the decisions of multilateral institutions, unilateral trade sanctions and massive internal subsidies. Combined with the opening up of developing countries' agricultural markets as mandated by the WTO, subsidised American and European agricultural exports will further threaten small-holder agriculture in developing countries. For example, European Common Agricultural Policy involves major subsidisation of agricultural exports and threaten small-holder agriculture in developing countries. In addition, within the EU, the top 20 per cent of farmers mainly benefit from such subsidies.

Contrary to the expectations generated by the United Nations summits, the process of globalisation and the dominant lifestyles have caused widespread social and cultural disruption, new economic chasms, ecological devastation and political disenfranchisement.

We are also concerned that European relations with Asia will focus predominantly on trade, and therefore on the fastest growing countries in the region, the ten countries invited to ASEM, and disregard other countries especially those in South Asia where poverty rates remain scandalously high. The EU should promote coherent policies in

trade and development cooperation that take into account the inter-relationships within the region as a whole.

In addition, newly proposed investment agreements, for example under the WTO, would give foreign companies the right to enter all economic sectors. Governments would lose their right to regulate foreign investment. In the process, they would lose control over macroeconomic policies and ultimately over their country's natural resources. If such a WTO agreement were to be concluded, there would be disastrous consequences, especially for developing countries. Local farms, banks and other enterprises would not be strong enough to compete with multinational companies. Many of them would have to close down. Worldwide, vulnerable groups would suffer most.

Finally, we are particularly concerned that current patterns of trade and investment are increasingly based on the exploitation of women at work, in their communities and in their homes.

2. Democracy and Human Rights

We believe that respect for human rights should be central to Asia-Europe relations while the struggle for human rights can only be fought within the context of cultural and social realities in each country. We do not believe that cultural particularism can be used to justify violations of human rights or that such violations are 'domestic' affairs. Neither do we believe that accountability for human rights violations is only an Asian responsibility. We oppose violations of human rights of the people of Northern Ireland and former Yugoslavia, as well as those of East Timor and Burma. In both Europe and Asia, the rights of migrant workers are systematically ignored and violated.

We believe in the universality of human rights as well as the indivisibility and interdependence of civil, political, social, economic and cultural rights. Cutbacks in social expenditure have eroded the socio-economic rights of the poor and vulnerable in many European countries. Europe should also be held accountable for "trans-border human rights violations" resulting from its economic relations with developing countries. European investments help prop up military regimes, gross violators of human rights, in countries such as Burma and Indonesia.

Many governments in Asia should be condemned for systematic violations of human rights. Many have internal security laws which allow arrest without warrant, detention without trial and imprisonment of people for proscribed political beliefs. Formally democratic countries frequently ignore the social and economic rights of their people. Local communities of farmers, fisherfolk, indigenous peoples and urban dwellers are often deprived of their rights to land and livelihoods to make way for so-called development projects without proper compensation or alternative livelihoods.

Many governments systematically encourage the occupation of indigenous peoples lands and strip them of resources. Governments and multinationals must recognise and respect that indigenous peoples' identity and livelihood are based on their land and resources, and are related to their religious, cultural, linguistic and economic systems.

We oppose the cynical manipulation of workers' rights as an instrument of international competition in trade and investment. We demand the repeal of laws setting barriers to the organisation of unions and other workers' organisations. We support concerted international action against gross violations of workers' rights including child labour, strike bans, and the torture and imprisonment of labour organisers.

Migration, and specifically labour migration, is increasingly an integral part of the economies of sending and receiving countries. Between Asia and Europe, population mobility is significant yet basic information, details of problems and policy formulation remain inadequate. It is important to include on the agenda of the Asia-Europe Meeting: transnational migration, its problems (especially human rights violations of women migrant workers), its prospects and impacts. Human trafficking is an integral, if unfortunate, part of labour migration. The numbers of people trafficked across national borders is growing, as is the network of traffickers who profit from the illicit trade. The illegal status of trafficked persons in host countries makes them more vulnerable to exploitation in manual, domestic and sexual labour.

3. Politics and Security

We welcome ASEM's attention to political and security issues. Wars and conflicts of all types in Asia and Europe victimise hundreds of thousands of civilians. Under these conditions, poverty eradication and economic growth are meaningless. We support all efforts to actively seek political solutions to armed conflicts with international mediation. The fundamental need for nuclear disarmament and regulation and reduction of the arms trade demand broad public discussion and the conclusion of transparent and equitable international agreements.

Anti-personnel landmines are a particularly insidious weapon of war whose legacy remains long after the conflict has ceased. Landmines kill and maim soldiers and civilians alike, resulting in ongoing costs of health care and rehabilitation, lost productivity and waste of formerly productive farmland, along with great personal loss.

RECOMMENDATIONS

We call on each of the government leaders attending the Asia-Europe Meeting (ASEM) to act on the following recommendations:

Human Rights

Government leaders must fully discuss human rights at the ASEM because these are the issues most relevant to the well-being of the people.

The role of civil society in promoting human rights, human dignity and spiritual values should be fully recognised by the governments.

Cooperation between Asia and Europe in the areas of human rights education and the development of human rights protection mechanisms should be given a high priority.

Food security is a basic human right and must be fully integrated into ASEM discussions, especially in preparation for the World Food Summit in November 1996.

All nations represented at ASEM should adopt specific legislation to eradicate discrimination against women.

European leaders should give a high priority to combating racism and xenophobia in their own countries.

Land and water rights of farmers, fisherfolk and forest people should be guaranteed and indigenous knowledge systems be recognised in intellectual property rights regimes. Further, all governments must implement the recommendations of the Working Group on Indigenous People.

Exploitation of Children

All governments participating in ASEM should immediately enforce the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. In particular, they should consider ways in which laws and law enforcement mechanisms could be improved and strengthened in the fight against the commercial exploitation of children.

Governments should support the First World Congress against the Commercial Sexual Exploitation of Children which will take place in Stockholm in August 1996.

Trafficking in Women and Children

Governments should adopt and implement minimum standard rules for the treatment of trafficked persons. Further, governments should fulfill their pledge made in the 1995 Beijing Platform for Action to step up cooperation and concerted action by all relevant law enforcement authorities to dismantle networks in the trafficking of women and children.

States and intergovernmental organisations should provide extra protection to minorities/indigenous people who live in border areas and are therefore especially vulnerable to trafficking.

Labour and Migration

ASEM governments should reaffirm their commitment to human rights standards, and adhere to International Covenants and to ILO Conventions. Workers rights, particularly the rights to organise and collective bargaining, as enshrined in the basic ILO Conventions should be respected by governments and enforced upon all activities of TNCs. ASEM leaders should commit themselves to eradicate forced labour.

Governments should ratify and implement the provisions of the UN Convention on the Rights of Migrant Workers and the Members of their Families and these principles should be reflected in bilateral agreements between labour sending and labour receiving countries.

An Asia-Europe Working Committee on Transnational Migration should be established which would include non-government representatives to consider economic, social, legal and health issues for migrants and the members of their families.

Social and Economic Relations

The WTO Ministerial Meeting in Singapore in December 1996 should be primarily concerned with the impact of the Uruguay Round. This should particularly focus on the impact on small farmers, on women, as well as the impact of intellectual property rights on indigenous peoples.

Based on concerns about intellectual property rights, the WTO Ministerial Conference must begin renegotiation of the Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) Agreement

ASEM leaders should oppose the introduction of a multilateral investment agreement into the WTO. Further, the liberalisation of telecommunications and maritime transport should be opposed

Governments must urgently agree on effective protection of small farmers and their livelihood and take all necessary measures to reverse the negative consequences of the WTO Agricultural Agreement.

The European Common Agricultural Policy should be fundamentally refocused and reformed.

The trade in toxic waste and products between European and Asian countries must be stopped through the negotiation of a code of conduct, standards and other mechanisms.

Peace and Security

The ASEAN Regional Forum should be transformed into a Multilateral Security and Disarmament Conference for the Asia Pacific region involving all regional military powers to prevent an Asian arms race.

Conventional arms sales and production within and between Asia and Europe must be phased out.

Following the lead of Austria, Belgium, Denmark, Ireland, Malaysia, Norway, Philippines and Sweden, all other governments must impose a total ban on the production, use, sale and trade in anti-personnel landmines.

Governments should conclude the Comprehensive Test Ban Treaty. They should initiate the negotiation of a nuclear weapons convention which supersedes the Non-Proliferation Treaty of Nuclear Weapons, commits the five nuclear powers to a rigid timetable for total nuclear disarmament, and provides for the complete prohibition of nuclear weapons.

EU members should sign the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty and the South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone Treaty.

The comprehensive decolonisation of the Asia Pacific region is an essential pre-condition for peace and security. The European Union should take responsibility for French decolonisation of French Polynesia; ASEAN for the immediate withdrawal of Indonesia from East Timor. ASEM countries should prevail upon the US to give independence to Micronesia

Northern Ireland

The conference condemns the inaction of the British government over the last 18 months in relation to the conflict in the north of Ireland. The conference urges the British government to immediately enter into inclusive all-party negotiations which should lead to a comprehensive political settlement and include burning issues such as policing,

release of political prisoners, demilitarisation of society and adherence to international human rights standards.

East Timor

The First Asia-Europe NGO Conference strongly condemns the shameless efforts of the Indonesian government to prevent any discussion of East Timor at the ASEM. We strongly protest against the decision of the Thai government not to allow East Timorese resistance leader Jose Ramos Horta to visit Thailand in order to attend this NGO meeting.

Further, we are deeply concerned about the continuing gross violations of human rights in occupied East Timor and calls for UN presence in the territory in order to protect the population. We believe that demilitarisation is an essential first step towards improving the human rights situation in East Timor. We firmly endorse East Timor's just demand for self-determination and welcome the growing movement of solidarity with East Timor in the countries of Southeast Asia and Europe.

We call for the unconditional release of Xanana Gusmao and all East Timorese political prisoners.

Burma

ASEM leaders must urge that the SLORC begin dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi; demand the release of all political prisoners and insist that the SLORC recognise the results of the 1990 elections.

Former Yugoslavia

ASEM leaders should ensure that the Dayton Accord is faithfully implemented. This includes protecting territorial integrity, ensuring that Sarajevo remains a multi-ethnic city, that refugees are safely returned, that human rights violations committed during the war are acknowledged and that the violators are brought to justice through the War Crimes Tribunal on Former Yugoslavia.

Notwithstanding the specific cases mentioned above, the Conference calls on European and Asian governments to reaffirm the overarching principles of decolonisation and the rights of peoples and nations to self-determination.